

# Welcoming & Inclusive Communities: Accessibility Project

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## Consultation Report



We would like to thank the following organizations for their enthusiastic participation and support during the consultation process

Across Boundaries  
 Alliance for South Asian Aids Prevention  
 ARCH Disability Law Centre  
 Canadian Hearing Society  
 Catholic Centre for Immigrants  
 Catholic Cross Cultural Services of Peel  
 Centre des Services Communautaires Vanier  
 Centre for Independent Living Toronto  
 Centre for Independent Living Ottawa  
 The Centre Skills Development and Training  
 COSTI Immigrant Services  
 Dixie Bloor Neighbourhood Services  
 Ecole des Adultes Le Carrefour  
 Economic and social Council de Ottawa-Carleton  
 Goodwill Hamilton  
 Immigrant Women Services Hamilton  
 JVS Toronto  
 LASI World Skills  
 Le Phenix  
 Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario  
 ODSP  
 Ottawa Centre for Independent Living  
 Quinte United Immigrant Services  
 Sexual Assault Centre of Hamilton Area  
 Silent Voice  
 St. Joseph Immigrant Women Centre  
 Sault St. Marie Community Information and Career Centre  
 Thorncliffe Neighbourhood Centre  
 Thunder Bay Multicultural Association  
 University Settlement  
 Vitesse ReSkillling Canada  
 Wesley Urban Ministries  
 YMCA Toronto  
 YMCA Sudbury  
 Link-up Employment Services  
 Canadian Association of Muslims with Disabilities (CAM-D)  
 Ethno-Racial People with Disabilities Coalition Of Ontario (ERDCO)  
 Alliance for South Asian AIDS prevention  
 Across Boundaries a ethno-racial mental health community centre

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## Welcoming and Inclusive Communities: Accessibility Project

### Executive Summary:

This project is an initiative of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) and the Ethno-Racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario (ERDCO). The purpose of this project is to identify the barriers experienced by newcomers with disabilities accessing settlement services and ultimately develop and deliver a two-day workshop for settlement workers throughout the Province of Ontario. Another objective of this project is to build bridges and opportunities for collaboration between the settlement and disability service sectors.

The project team's consultation process included 7 focus groups held in Toronto, Hamilton and Ottawa with settlement workers and newcomers with disabilities; an online survey disseminated to managers of settlement agencies in Ontario and 6 key informant one-on-one interviews with stakeholders in both the settlement and disability sectors.

### General Findings

#### Newcomers with Disabilities:

Newcomer with disabilities struggle with a number of key barriers common to all immigrants settling in Ontario, for instance, language barriers, finding affordable housing, access to other forms of education (college or university, trades etc), and employment. However, newcomers with disabilities experience additional barriers as people with disabilities, for example:

- Challenges in the interaction with settlement workers, due to a lack of understanding of disability issues in general and a lack of capacity, knowledge and resources to service them.
- A lack of disability-related accommodations in ESL classes, and unavailability of American Sign Language (ASL) in their local communities
- Newcomers with disabilities are sometimes turned away from temporary housing created to service refugees because the welcoming centre or shelters are inaccessible. The lack of accessible housing that meets their needs forces them into cramped environments where they are not able to utilize the space due to narrow doors; this restricts their daily functioning.
- Newcomers tend to understate their needs for fear of exclusion or deportation. This does not help them in terms of self-advocacy to get their needs met. Settlement workers can support newcomer clients with disabilities by encouraging their self-advocacy skills.

### **Settlement Workers:**

The settlement workers that attended our focus groups and participated in the one-on-one interviews and filled out our online survey were eager to share and learn new information on how to better service newcomers with disabilities. Main challenges identified by this group of respondents were:

- Serving newcomers with disabilities takes a lot more time than serving other newcomers; on average 5 or 6 times more.
- Lack of information on available services for people with disabilities.
- Lack of dedicated funds at settlement agencies to work with clients with disabilities.
- Physical inaccessibility of newcomer welcome centres and settlement agencies.
- Not enough partnerships between disability organizations and settlement organizations

### **Key Recommendation:**

- Provide training to settlement workers and their agencies around appropriate interaction with newcomers with disabilities.
- When developing the training curriculum, include information on different categories of disabilities. This will help frontline workers and managers understand disability beyond mobility related impairments and will allow them to implement accessibility solutions that target the needs of people with visible and invisible disabilities.
- Settlement workers and agencies need to be trained in creating inclusive spaces and client-centred customer service
- Train service providers to design/use outreach methods that speak specifically and openly about disability and accessible services in their agencies.
- Promote networking between disability and settlement sectors.
- There is a need for an expert or resource person connected to settlement agencies to help settlement workers to strategize around providing appropriate service and referrals for newcomers with disabilities.
- Create an easily accessible listing of all programs and services available to newcomers with disabilities and their eligibility criteria.

## Introduction:

### Context of the project: The OCASI/ERDCO Partnership

The passing of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA, 2005) and its subsequent standards provided the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) and the Ethno-Racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario (ERDCO) the opportunity to create a partnership and provide leadership in improving access to settlement services for newcomers with disabilities. This project is funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). Over the next two years (2011-2013), the project will develop and deliver a two day training workshop for settlement workers throughout the Province of Ontario. The primary objective of these workshops is to provide settlement service agencies with the knowledge, skills and organizational planning needed to improve services for newcomers with disabilities. Another primary objective of this project is to build bridges between the disability and settlement service sectors.

We began this process by establishing a fifteen (15) member Advisory Committee, which consists of representatives from both the settlement and disability service sectors and newcomers/immigrants with disabilities. Then we proceeded to engage in an environmental scan and consultation process with key stakeholders in both sectors to help us identify the barriers, gaps in services and possible solutions to help inform the curriculum development for the workshops. This report will highlight the major findings of our consultation process, recommendations and provide a list of resources for referrals, context and background.

### The AODA:

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act passed unanimously in the Ontario legislature in May of 2005. The goal of the Act is to achieve a barrier-free Ontario for all persons with disabilities residing or visiting the province by the year 2025. This includes; goods, services, facilities, accommodation, employment, buildings, structures and premises on or before January 1, 2025. The Act is applicable to all organizations with one or more employees in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors.

Complementary to the Act is the establishment of five standards that organizations must comply with within this time period. If agencies are persistently non-compliant, the province has “the power to conduct inspections, assign monetary penalties and prosecute through the courts”. The first of these standards is the Customer Service Standards (released in 2008). Organizational policies and training must be in place to ensure compliance by January 1, 2012.

In the spring of 2011 the Integrated Standards, which comprise the Transportation, Information and Communication, Built Environment and Employment Standards were released. Each Standard has its own compliance date, (for more information, see: [www.accesson.ca](http://www.accesson.ca)).

#### The Customer Service Standards:

The Customer Service Standards mandates the establishment of policies, practices and procedures that;

- (1) Outlines and governs how services will be delivered to people with disabilities.
- (2) Service providers must use “reasonable efforts” to ensure that its policies, practices and procedures are consistent with the following principles:
  1. The services must be provided in a manner that respects the dignity and independence of persons with disabilities.
  2. The service provided must be integrated as an overall mode of operations of the agency, unless alternative actions are deemed necessary to ensure that people with disabilities are able to benefit from the service.
  3. Persons with disabilities must be given an equal opportunity to obtain the use and benefit from the services of the organization, similar to any other client.

Another important element of the Regulation is all employees working with or providing services on behalf of the service provider must be trained (on an ongoing basis) in the policies, practices and procedures set out by the organization to govern the provision of services to people with disabilities.

#### Note from the Project Team:

Though it is important that organizations seek compliance as set out by the AODA, as a bottom line, the goals of this project is to establish a process that clearly identifies the barriers experienced by newcomers with disabilities while settling in Ontario, the gaps in services and opportunities for collaboration between the settlement and the disability sectors.

## Methodology

The project team used a mixed method, qualitative/quantitative approach for data collection. The project team collected data in 3 different ways: focus groups, an online survey and key informant interviews. The distribution of respondents was as follows:

Total number of focus groups:	7
Focus groups with service providers:	3 (37 participants in total)
Focus groups with newcomers	4 (31 participants in total)
Online survey	43 respondents
Key informant interviews	6

### Focus Groups

Given the focus of the project on accessibility, special emphasis was placed on providing disability-related accommodations in all sessions. Requested accommodations included sign language interpreters and attendant care workers. In the case of visually-impaired participants, materials were provided electronically ahead of time in order for them to review them before the sessions.

#### Focus Groups with Newcomers with Disabilities

Participant recruitment was done through the project's partner agencies. The flyer invitation called for newcomers who self-identified as people with disabilities in the Greater Toronto Area, Hamilton and Ottawa who had been in Canada for up to 5 years. Their ages ranged from the early twenties to mid-fifties; their time in the country from 1 month to over 5 years. Approximately half the number of newcomer participants had refugee status.

#### A Note about Reaching Out to Francophone Newcomers with Disabilities

One of the focus groups with newcomers was held in Ottawa in French. The project team faced language limitations in reaching out to this group. None of the project team members have French language skills, therefore, it was decided to communicate with potential participants via email. This allowed us to access the language skills of fellow staff members at OCASI, who could translate and write messages to participants. Few participants registered for the session. When we met the participants in person, they expressed that other members of their network were interested in attending, but were discouraged because they prefer telephone communication over email.

#### Focus Groups with Service Providers

During the consultation, we held 3 focus groups with members of service providing agencies, with a total of 37 participants. The majority were affiliated with settlement agencies; however, some came



from disability-specific organizations, such as the Canadian Hearing Society and the Centre for Independent Living. We also had participants from the Good Will and Service Canada. The diversity in participating organizations is reflective of the nature of the partnership between ERDCO and OCASI and, more broadly, of the needs of newcomers with disabilities and the workers who serve them. The sessions included participants from Toronto, Mississauga, Hamilton, Thunder Bay, Sudbury, Ottawa, Belleville and Alfred. Two of the sessions were held in English and one in French.

### Online Survey

The majority of service provider focus group participants were frontline workers, therefore, an online survey was created in order to get the management perspective on serving newcomers with disabilities. The survey was sent to participants using an online survey tool. Responses were anonymous and included both closed and open ended questions. The purpose of the survey was to collect information about accessibility policies and procedures at OCASI member agencies. 43 agencies responded.

### Key Informant Interviews

6 key informant interviews were held with members of the disability and settlement communities. Informant profiles were chosen carefully to include a variety of experiences related to settlement and disability. Respondents included a settlement worker who specializes in disability; immigrants with disabilities who have achieved full integration into Canadian society and activists who work in favour of racialized people with disabilities, among others.

### Findings

According to Statistics Canada's Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) Profile of Disability in Canada (2006), approximately 4.4 million or 14% of the population identify as having a disability. In Ontario, the rate is slightly higher at 15.5% of Ontarians identify as having a disability. The 2006 survey indicated a 2.6% increase in the reporting of a disability from the 2001 PALS report. This is attributed in large part to an aging population (PALS 2006; <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-628-x/89-628-x2007002-eng.htm>). Although this report provides us with a general sense of disability in Canada, by province, age grouping and gender; other factors such as ethno-racial background and immigration status and disability are not provided. Similarly, this project has identified very little relevant research at either the academic or government levels. This prevents community agencies from clearly articulating the statistical scope, existence or needs of newcomers with disabilities. The lack of data may be due to the false assumption that newcomers with disabilities do not reside in Canada in any significant numbers; owing to Canada's existing immigration policy, that places heavy restrictions or prevents people with disabilities and their families from immigrating to Canada if they are deemed or perceived to place an "excessive demand" on Canada's health or social services.

The consultation process of this project and other community-based initiatives created to provide services to this group points to the fact, newcomers with disabilities are residing in Canada and are arriving via other mechanisms such as Family Sponsorship and the Refugee system. Also, advocates of people with disabilities point out that the types of disabilities that newcomers may have, are not what we overtly identify or understand as a disability, in other word invisible disabilities. The lack of recognition of newcomers with disabilities in Ontario has many consequences, one of which is the lack of adequate and relevant services in both the settlement and disability service sectors. This report hopes to bridge these gaps and improve the overall service delivery to newcomers with disabilities.

### **The Needs of Newcomers with Disabilities**

A total of four focus groups were held in the Province of Ontario with newcomers with disabilities; one (1) in Toronto, two (2) in Hamilton, and one (1) in Ottawa (in French). We asked these newcomers to Canada a set of ten questions attempting to explore their various experiences both positive and negative, the gaps in service and their experiences obtaining the various aspects of settlement such as housing, healthcare, legal services, education, employment, community and recreational services as well as other aspects of daily life. We also conducted six (6) one-on-one key informant interviews with various stakeholders in the disability and settlement sectors. The following are the findings of these consultations.

#### **Access to Services: Cultural Competency, Communication & Navigating the System**

Participants came from all walks of life, ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic status. In each group, different issues dominated; for instance, in the Toronto focus group, most of the participants were well educated in their country of origin, had strong English language skills and were “job ready”. While in Hamilton, the participants predominately arrived to Canada as refugee claimants and had little to no English language skills, resulting in numerous gaps and barriers experienced by these communities. This speaks to the diversity of the disability community as it intersects with issues of gender and immigration status.

When the project team asked the participants if they had accessed settlement services, and if they could tell us about their experiences; a range of responses were received. Some experienced a number of frustrations based on the feeling that they were disrespected by settlement workers and at times felt the workers crossed lines by asking inappropriate questions about their disability or how they came to be disabled. The participants considered this to be inappropriate and unnecessary to obtaining information or services. Similarly, disability advocates spoke to the lack of recognition of invisible disabilities such as HIV/AIDS and mental health issues that are often times stigmatized and/or not recognized as a disability. Newcomers may be reluctant to disclose their disability in a space that feels unsafe to them. Attitudinal barriers have often been identified as one of the largest barrier for access and equity

for people with disabilities in general, combined with cultural understandings, stereotypes and stigma, newcomers with disabilities experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and ultimately at times, feeling disrespected.

Both disability advocates interviewed in our one-on-one interviews, and participants in our focus groups articulated the concern that many settlement workers did not believe that newcomers with disabilities existed in their communities. Some believe that it is not their role and/or they do not have the capacity or knowledge to serve newcomers with disabilities. As a result, some newcomers felt the workers did not want to service them. Other participants felt that settlement workers at times made promises of service or referral that were inappropriate or did not do what they said they would do. Participants also highlighted the lack of follow-up to ensure that they were receiving the right type of service for them. Due to the varying nature of disability experienced at the individual level, it is important that services come from a client centred, holistic approach to ensure their settlement and integration to Canada. Many, particularly those with hearing impairments and other communication disabilities felt extremely isolated and ignored because of their inability to communicate verbally or via ASL (American Sign Language), and they felt that people were not willing to put in the effort to try to communicate with them.

Many, if not most participants felt that they did not have a clear understanding of Canadian culture and the Canadian system, thus, although, they felt Canada had a lot to offer, most were unsure of the programs and services they were eligible for, and found that their settlement workers were unable to support them in finding out. Many complained of hearing about programs and services geared towards people with disabilities through other community members rather than their workers. In fact, many of the participants of the focus groups attended the meeting hoping to find out available resources and services that they could tap into. Disability rights advocates consulted in this project recommended the need for an expert or resource person connected to settlement agencies to help settlement workers to strategize around providing appropriate service and referrals for newcomers with disabilities. This model is being utilized at Dixie-Bloor Neighbourhood Centre in the Peel Region.

Although, many spoke to barriers to services, others spoke about positive experiences with their service provider, though, they acknowledged that the settlement worker did not have extensive knowledge of disability issues or how to service them; it was felt that the workers were trying their best. The positive attributes identified by the participants were; the worker took time with them, they asked relevant questions and were interested and willing to learn about how they could help them and they provided follow-up, even when the individual was referred outside the agency. Participants felt that if they received good service that it was a result of the individual service worker rather than an overall organizational or service policy of

the agency. And finally, some participants had no access to settlement services and did not know what these services could provide for them.

### Labour Market Integration And Income Security

Like most people of working age, most if not all respondents felt it important for them to find employment. In the Toronto focus group, none of the participants used settlement services to help them find employment but rather sought supports amongst disability service agencies such as Link-up employment services. However, the Toronto respondents felt that the services available to them were not relevant or did not match their employment needs, such as re-training or resume writing, however, they still found it difficult to find employment in their field of choice. Similarly, this group identified that due to their disability, they did not feel that they could get “survival jobs” such as stocking and lifting, retail or driving jobs; such as taxi driver or construction jobs because they could not physically do the job or they required accommodations in order to fulfill the duties of the position. Although, not ideal, these jobs allow able-bodied newcomers to have opportunities of employment until they are able to find employment in their field of choice; while newcomers with disabilities are not able to enter into the labour market until much later due to barrier to employment. Also, many of the respondents did not think that in the general labour market, they and other people with disabilities would be able to compete with their able-bodied cohorts, even if they had the skills and the knowledge to do the job. Many respondents in all four focus groups felt that the government should set policy or create opportunities for people with disabilities to be employed. However, because the disability rights movement in Canada has moved away from a segregation model to an inclusion model of disability, this is not likely to happen.

For many of the participants in Hamilton, they felt if they were able to be trained in a specific skill or trade and obtained employment, they would be able to feel useful and contributing members of society as well as less isolated. However, this group identified language barriers to be the biggest barrier to them obtaining training and employment opportunities.

### Access to Education

*“Everything is important, but learning English is more important, because I know what I need and if I know the language I can speak for myself and say what I need”.* – Newcomer with a disability, Hamilton focus group

Education, and in particular learning English as a Second Language (ESL), and American Sign Language (ASL), was identified as a priority issue for many of the respondents who have arrived here as refugees

or under a family sponsorship process. However, many of the local programs such as LINC classes do not have appropriate accommodations in order for the individual with a disability to participate in class or follow along with the lesson plan. This was particularly true for newcomers with visual impairments. Often times, the local services would refuse accommodation in favour of referring people to disability specific classes such as a LINC class available at the CNIB Toronto region. For those that live outside of Toronto and rely on public transportation this could be a very time consuming endeavour. Similarly, due to cuts to programming and services in the settlement sector and programs such as the Mohawk College program to train ASL to deaf newcomers was cut, leaving residence of Hamilton forced to look for programs outside their community.

For those that were able to attend LINC classes in their local communities, they found the class structure a difficult environment to learn, for example, having people with differing levels of English proficiency in the same class.

Ultimately, for this group of respondents, the fact that they were unable to learn Canada's official languages made them dependent on their settlement service workers to assist them through most of their needs. With limited recourses in their language they felt this was a lot to ask of one or two workers to handle and suggested that more services be available in their language.

Some respondents pointed out that having materials in alternative languages, did not necessarily help them, because they were also illiterate in their own language. This adds another layer of complication for some newcomers with disabilities in their settlement process.

### **Access to Health and Disability-Specific Services**

*"In general I do not know which services are out there and I would like for them to be better publicized". –Newcomer with a disability, Ottawa French language focus group*

Access to healthcare for many respondents was their primary goal when they first arrived to Canada, and they were very thankful for the services provided by the Canadian healthcare system. After people were able to address their healthcare needs, they felt they were able to move on to achieve or obtain the other basic needs, such as housing, education and employment, etc.

When respondents were asked if they were aware of disability-related agencies and if they were familiar with the services they provided, some responded they were very much connected to the agencies that provided services for their particular disability such as the MS Society or BALANCE for Blind Adults. They were very thankful for the services they provided. Other respondents were familiar with these agencies but felt they were not able to provide them with appropriate services as newcomers with disabilities and felt their services were geared towards people who were already established in Canada. Still, some respondents had little to no knowledge of the disability agencies that they could seek supports from.

and, in fact, stated no one had ever asked them as a person with a disability what supports they needed, beyond healthcare.

An interesting finding of the consultation process was those respondents that were primarily received services from settlement services, indicated they had limited interaction with disability-related service agencies; while those that were connected to disability-related agencies had limited interaction with settlement agencies. However, it was discovered that neither sector, in general, displayed a clear understanding or provided services or resources that incorporated the other sector in any significant way, with the obvious exception of agencies with a specialized mandate of servicing Racialized communities with disabilities.

### **Housing**

*-“When you don’t have a stable place to put your head down at night, you cannot think about anything else, like going to school, learning English or looking for a job”* -Disability rights advocate in Toronto

When participants were asked what they felt was their priority settlement issue when they first came to Canada and what they felt their priority issue is now; many pointed to accessible and affordable housing. A disability advocate relayed his own experience with the shelter system when he first arrived to Canada as a refugee, when he went to the refugee centre he was told that the centre did not have the capacity to support him with his particular disability and made a referral to a local homeless shelter, where there were people with varying types and degrees of disabilities but, they were unable to support him through his particular needs as a newcomer and his particular disability-related needs.

Also, the lack of accessible and affordable housing left newcomers with disabilities to live in cramped apartments with family members and narrow doors which severely limit their access to their own apartment and the daily activities of life, such as bathing and going to the bathroom.

### **Racialization and Stigma**

The stigmatization of having a disability for these respondents made them feel isolated and ignored and weighted on their self-esteem. For those with invisible disabilities, this made them reluctant to disclose their disability to settlement workers because they feared judgement and that their health status may not be kept confidential. Some disability advocates suggested having relevant information available both in their agency, but particularly on their website, so that newcomers with disabilities could obtain information privately without feeling targeted. This would ultimately create a more inclusive space for newcomers with disabilities and potentially allow them to disclose in a safe environment and possibly obtaining adequate and relevant services.

On the other side of the pendulum, it was felt that disability services did not provide services that were adequate for newcomers with disabilities. It was felt by the respondents that it was necessary to provide some programming that was culturally relevant and allowed for newcomers with disabilities to get together to discuss common experiences and ways of addressing and supporting each other.

### **Self-advocacy**

The barriers expressed throughout this report, significantly impact on the ability of newcomers with disabilities to self-advocate and to achieve their settlement goals. If newcomers with disabilities do not have access to LINC classes with accommodations or access to information in their language of choice, it is difficult for them to obtain the relevant information and tools to help develop and enhance their self-advocacy skills. Thus, making newcomers with disabilities more dependent on the system and their workers in particular; resulting in a much slower settlement and integration process. These issues also strongly negatively impacted newcomers with disabilities ability to obtain appropriate housing, seek other educational goals, employment and community participation goals.

Many respondents identified that they were not familiar with legislation such as the Human Rights code, Employment standards' duty to accommodate or the AODA. Thus, respondents were not familiar with their rights and were unclear of what they were entitled to as resides of Ontario. All respondents identified their desire to be independent, self sustaining contributing members of society. However, they felt strongly limited by the multiple barriers owing to both their immigration and disability status.

All respondents in the one-on-one interviews felt that settlement and disability sectors needed to work more collaboratively and suggested creating joint networks, conferences, roundtables and other discussion opportunities to help identify structural and client-specific barriers to better support this community achieve their goals in Ontario.

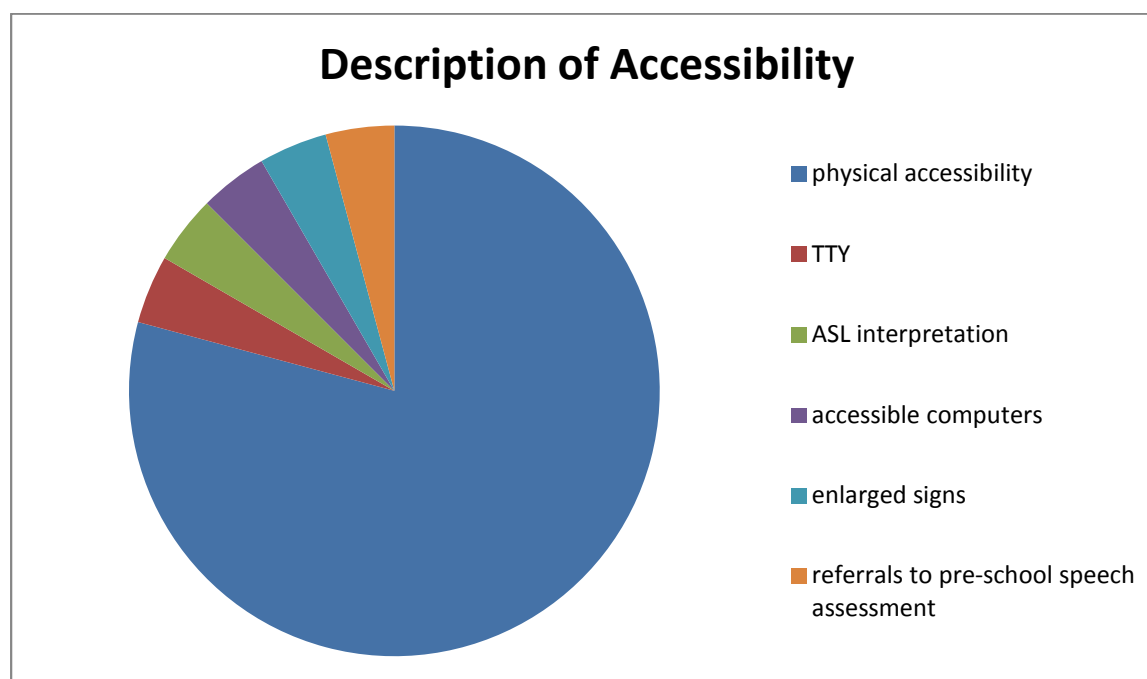
### **Settlement Agencies in Ontario: Accessibility**

The project team collected information from both frontline workers and managers on the status of accessible services in their agencies. The project team sought information about the current levels of accessibility in their agency, their understanding of the needs of newcomers with disabilities, the barriers to improve accessible services, and their best accessibility practices. Since the purpose of the consultation is to support the design of accessibility training for settlement workers, a specific question on training needs was included.

### Understanding of accessibility

The understanding of accessibility varied among participants in the focus groups and survey. 90.7% of the survey respondents described their agency as accessible. While this is unquestionably a high percentage, when asked to provide specific examples of accessibility within their organizations, many respondents referred exclusively to physical accommodations such as ramps or elevators. Furthermore, some service providers mentioned that they do not have clients with disabilities. This suggests that agency staff mostly think about disability in terms of visible, mobility-related disabilities, and do not consider accommodations required for clients with invisible or other types of disabilities. It is also important to consider that the agencies' outreach may not be inclusive or explicit enough for newcomers with disabilities. This may translate into fewer clients with disabilities requesting the services of the agency or disclosing their disability.

The chart below describes the frequency and types of accommodations that respondents mentioned in the survey. Responses clearly reflect an awareness of mobility related disabilities. Smaller numbers of participants mentioned other types of accommodations for clients with disabilities, such as hearing or visual impairments or communication-related disabilities.





### The Needs of Newcomers with Disabilities

Survey respondents (N=43) prioritized the needs of newcomers with disabilities as follows:

Need	Percentage of total responses	Actual number of responses
Lack of language skills to express their needs	46.5%	20
Lack of awareness of the services available to them and/or knowledge of how to navigate the system	34.88%	15
Stigma	18.6%	8
Lack of physical accessibility	18.6%	8
Lack of services that meet their specific needs, including sign language interpreters, materials in braille	16.27%	7

It's important to note that lack of language skills and ability to navigate services are challenges that all newcomers to Canada face. However, in the case of newcomers with disabilities, lack of accessibility and stigma become additional layers that oftentimes hinder their access to language training and other settlement services.

Other barriers to accessing services were mentioned, although not repeatedly. These include: racism, insensitivity, and lack of information about invisible disabilities. One of the participants mentioned that the disability community is not aware of newcomers, while the immigrant-serving community does not know how to serve the unique needs of people with disabilities. This issue points towards one of the key elements of the Accessibility Project: The need to improve services so that they address the specific needs of newcomers that experience a double or triple layer of barriers to integration to Canada.

### Serving Newcomers with Disabilities: Best Practices and Challenges

#### Best Practices

Participation in focus groups and the online survey revealed a wide range of levels of awareness and expertise in serving newcomers with disabilities among participants. Some focus group participants expressed that their main goal in attending the session was to learn from others' practices and experiences, while others had a number of effective practices to share. The best practices mentioned in the sessions are described below.

- Clients are assessed around barriers and needs for service individually and holistically.
- Frequent "accessibility" checks throughout the building to ensure an easily accessible environment
- Accessibility is a regular topic in staff meetings

- Accommodating by moving classes around to meet their needs (for example, LINC classes on main floor to avoid stairs)
- Agency brochures are provided in alternate format and copies of cross-disability/new immigrant magazines that profile success stories are kept in the lobby of the centre for people to read while they wait.
- Settlement services and resources are offered in American Sign Language.
- Accessible venues for community events.
- Got funding from CIC to create resources in ASL (for example videos)
- Partnerships with other organizations in order to overcome accessibility challenges. For example, in one agency, the building is not physically accessible. The agency partnered with the local library in order to be able to meet with clients with mobility disabilities in an accessible space close by.
- The best practice used in our agency is to treat them like everyone else and not make them feel different.
- Sharing information with family members and other workers.
- Connecting with doctors and clinics in the area, as this is often the first point of contact for newcomers
- Network with disability organizations
- Having a settlement worker that specializes in clients with disability
- Invite outside agencies to provide workshops to build capacity - March of Dimes, Community Living Toronto

It is important to note that several of the “best practices” listed include elements of connection with other organizations. Some settlement workers have found that it is beneficial to connect with other organizations to improve the accessibility of their services and ultimately, to improve their outreach and level of service to their clients with disabilities.

### **Challenges in Serving Newcomers with Disabilities**

The challenges to serve newcomers with disabilities are listed below. They are divided into two categories: challenges that are intrinsic to their agencies or the settlement sector, and challenges that are part of the broader system.

#### *Challenges related to the settlement sector*

- Settlement workers need more training to identify invisible disabilities
- Serving newcomers with disabilities takes a lot more time than serving other newcomers. It often takes 5 to 6 more time. The problem is that Citizenship and Immigration Canada measures performance based on how many clients are served in a

given amount of time. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that it takes much longer to serve newcomers with disabilities.

- Lack of awareness of some service providers on the implication of intersecting identities. For example, being a woman, living in poverty, being a newcomer and having a disability.<sup>1</sup>
- Lack of information on available services for people with disabilities.
- Lack of dedicated funds at settlement agencies to work with clients with disabilities
- Physical inaccessibility of newcomer welcome centres
- Effective ways to attract and retain newcomer clients with disabilities.
- Involving funders and management in the process of training regarding disability would be important, so that they will “buy into” the work that is being done.
- More therapists that are culturally competent<sup>2</sup>
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada should let us know what kinds of disabilities are present in the clients that come in so we can prepare ourselves as organizations.
- We need to focus on people’s abilities, rather than their disabilities
- We need to network with other people who may have had similar experiences and have good advice to give
- Major gap: not enough partnerships between disability organizations and settlement organizations
- Lack of interpretation services, including ASL

#### *Challenges outside the settlement sector*

- Sometimes clients are referred to other services (for example family doctors) and the venues are not accessible.
- Waiting lists for some relevant services are extremely long (for example for housing)
- Lack of awareness of some service providers on the implication of intersecting identities. For example, being a woman, living in poverty, being a newcomer and having a disability.
- The criteria for people with disabilities to use Wheeltrans (Toronto) exclude some users with a disability.
- More organizations that specialize in trauma for people who have been traumatized by war and other types of violence (comment was made in the Ottawa area).
- Some programs let people fall between the cracks of the system

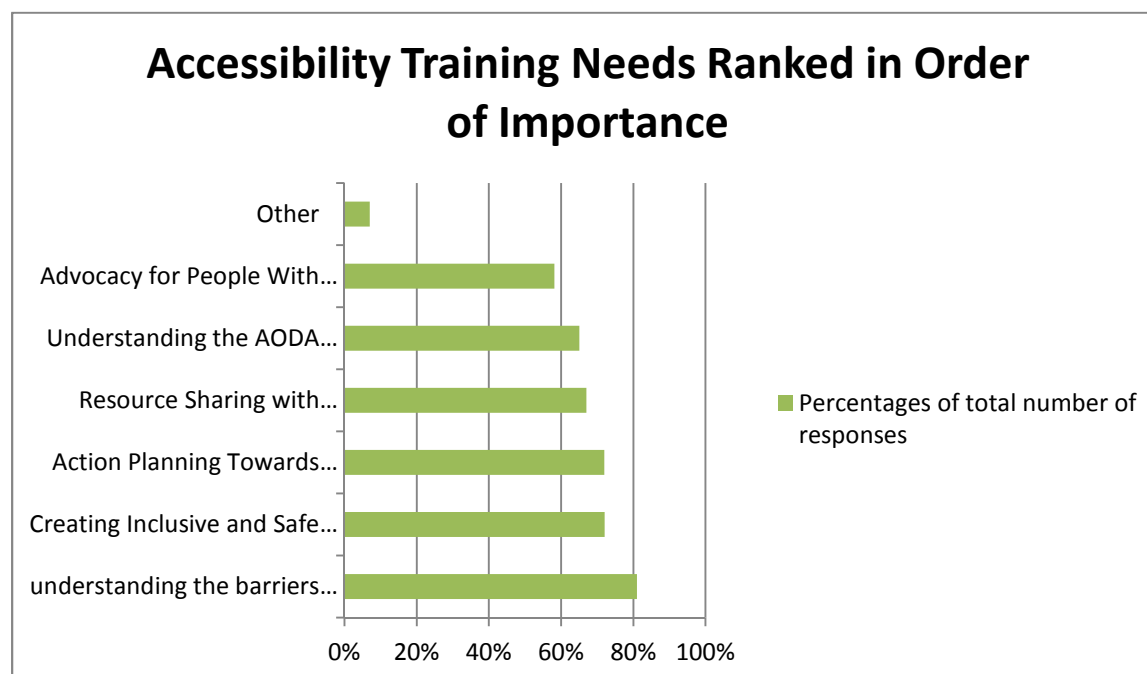
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<sup>1</sup> This point has been added to both lists, as lack of awareness of the implications of intersecting identities can happen in any service context

<sup>2</sup> Applies both within and without the settlement sector

### Accessibility Training Needs

Given the fact that one of the main purposes of the consultation is to support the design of an Accessibility curriculum for settlement workers, participants were asked a specific question about their training needs in relation to accessibility for newcomers with disabilities. Their answers are listed below:



Close to 80% of the survey respondents expressed the need to know more about the barriers newcomers with disabilities face. During the focus groups, some participants expressed knowledge about the needs and barriers of newcomers with disabilities, yet, many of them would like to understand the needs better. Some of them specifically named their desire to better understand the differences between various types of disabilities in order to better serve clients.

During the focus group sessions, the word 'stigma' appeared a number of times in connection with the needs of newcomers with disabilities. In the survey, 72% said they wanted to learn how to create inclusive and safe spaces for newcomer clients with disabilities.

Some of the respondents both in the focus groups and the survey, identified the need to include management in the development of plans to increase accessibility of services. 72% of the survey respondents said they wanted to learn more about action planning towards accessibility in their organizations.

Almost 68% of the survey respondents pointed out the importance of sharing resources with other service providers. In fact, participants in all 3 service provider focus groups expressed the desire to maintain contact with fellow participants in the session they attended. They clearly valued the possibility of keeping contact with other service providers as sources of information and referral. Members of disability organizations that attended the focus group sessions expressed this need even more emphatically. Some of them get requests for service from newcomers, and they expressed they are not always equipped with the resources to give them the services they require.

Regarding the AODA, focus group and survey responses revealed diverse levels of understanding and implementation. 65% of the survey respondents said they would like to learn more about the AODA and its application in their agency. Some respondents referred to having implemented related policies and training for all staff in their agencies, while others had vaguely heard about the AODA and some had not heard about it at all. This diversity in exposure to the AODA should be considered when designing the Accessibility Curriculum.

## Recommendations

The recommendations below are related to the various themes that emerged in the consultation. Some of them speak directly to accessibility training needs, while others are more related to advocacy in and beyond the settlement sector.

Training-related recommendations:

1. Include information on different categories of disabilities in the curriculum. This will help frontline workers and managers understand disability beyond mobility related impairments and will allow them to implement accessibility solutions that target the needs of people with visible and invisible disabilities.
2. Train service providers to design/use outreach methods that speak specifically and openly about disability and accessible services in their agencies. This will allow them to attract newcomers who need their services but that currently do not use them due to lack of knowledge or the belief that they do not suit their needs.
3. Include a section on accessibility strategy design in order to help managers and frontline workers define and plan for next steps in accessibility.
4. Include a section about effective and respectful communication techniques for frontline workers. This would help them create a safe space where clients with disabilities would be able to express their needs.
5. Promote networking between disability and settlement sectors. This could be done through digital media such as settlement.org and the project wiki. The purpose would be to establish connections between both sectors in order to help settlement workers and disability workers to make cross-referrals when appropriate.
6. Include some information on the AODA, specifically on compliance needs. In this way, accessibility strategies would be aligned with the Act.
7. Disability rights advocates consulted in this project recommended the need for an expert or resource person connected to settlement agencies to help settlement workers to strategize around providing appropriate service and referrals for newcomers with disabilities. This model is being utilized in agencies such as Dixie-Bloor Neighbourhood Centre in the Peel Region.
8. Create a database of the provincial and federal programs available for people with disabilities, with a description of the program and their eligibility criteria (including immigration status) in simple and alternative languages.
9. LINC Classes should be accessible to newcomers with disabilities in their local communities and accommodations should be provided to ensure newcomers' ability to learn. On a similar note, ASL as a second language should be available in local communities.

10. Newcomers with disabilities need to learn their rights under the Human Rights Code, employment standards duty to accommodate as well as the AODA, in order to ensure they are familiar with their rights and are able to self-advocate, when seeking employment and other opportunities such as education, housing, healthcare etc. Similarly, settlement workers should also be trained in the various legislations and how they can use these Acts in support of their client with a disability.
11. Best or promising practices by organizations should be promoted and duplicated by other service providers in the sector. For instance, many examples of programs that had a positive impact on newcomers with disabilities should be known by other agencies that services this community. Many clients pointed to programs available at BALANCE for Blind Adults have programs that are responsive to their various needs, and it was felt that this agency should outreach to other agencies to ensure that their work and philosophy can be replicated elsewhere.
12. In order for structural or organizational changes to happen there needs to be buy-in at all levels of the organization and there needs to be action planning that is inclusive of all stakeholders of the agencies such as managers, frontline staff and clients.
13. Have materials available at the airport highlighting where newcomers with disabilities can go for supports and what types of supports are available to them in alternative languages and formats, for example, large print or on a CD.
14. Settlement workers and agencies need to be trained in creating inclusive spaces and client-centred customer service.

## Resources

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUPS

#### Welcoming and Inclusive Communities Accessibility Project

This is to certify that I, \_\_\_\_\_, have been given the following information with respect to my participation as a volunteer in a focus group for the Welcoming and Inclusive Communities Accessibility Project.

- **Purpose of the project:** Over the next two years, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) and The Ethno Racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario (ERDCO), will develop and deliver training sessions for settlement service providers in order to help them provide better services for newcomers with disabilities. At the same time, the project will focus on building connections between the settlement and disability sectors by facilitating the creation of partnerships between both fields.
- **Purpose of the focus group:** to gather information from newcomers with disabilities and service providers that will inform training design, as well as other project activities.
- **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked some questions and can answer and discuss these questions with others in the focus group. The session will last two hours and will be tape recorded. We will transcribe the tape recordings, removing any identifying information such as individual names and then will destroy the tapes. These are standard procedures for focus groups.
- **Participation is voluntary:** Your participation in the focus groups is voluntary. You may decline to answer any or all questions, and you are free to leave at any time.
- **Discomforts and risks:** There are no known discomforts or risks. However, some family and work issues can be sensitive. Although we are making every effort to ensure the confidentiality of any information provided, there is a slight possibility that you could be identified if you provide very specific information on your circumstances.
- **Benefits to me:** Some people find it beneficial to discuss their experiences of accessing services as newcomers with disabilities in a venue where others will share similar experiences. The exchange of both positive and negative experiences can be beneficial for various group members. In case you need them, disability-related accommodations will be provided when requested before the session. At the end of the session. You will receive a one-time, \$ 20 honorarium, and 2 way local transit fare. Light refreshments will be provided during the session.

- **Benefits to society:** We are hoping to identify ways to improve services for newcomers with disabilities in settlement agencies across the province. Listening to the expertise and experiences that you share will be very valuable for this purpose.
- **Statement of confidentiality:** Every attempt will be made to ensure confidentiality. There will be a short period of time during which individuals and institutions could be identified by the project team, but all data will be stripped of identifying information before anything is reported from the project. Once identifiers have been removed, the only individuals who could identify your information are those who participated in this focus group with you.

Volunteer: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_, 2011

## Appendix B: Invitation Flyer



Ethno-Racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario  
*"Promoting Awareness of Culture & Disability"*

### **ARE YOU A NEWCOMER WITH A DISABILITY? HAVE YOU BEEN IN CANADA FOR 5 YEARS OR LESS?**

If you answered "yes" to these questions, and you live in the Ottawa area and you identify as a Francophone; we would like to invite you to a focus group session on

**Tuesday, August 9th, from 11:30am to 2pm**

At the end of the session you will receive a \$20 honorarium and TTC tokens. Lunch will be provided.

Attendant care, ASL interpretation and other forms of accommodation can be provided upon request. The space is wheelchair accessible.

If you would like to participate please contact Ayshia. You will be asked a few questions to confirm your participation

Ayshia Musleh

[ayshia.musleh@sympatico.ca](mailto:ayshia.musleh@sympatico.ca)

Tel: 416.901.5454

Toll free: 1.888.988.3999

**We look forward to hearing from you!!!**

### **The WELCOMING & INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES ACCESSIBILITY PROJECT**

Over the next two years, OCASI and The Ethno Racial People with Disabilities Coalition of Ontario (ERDCO), will develop and deliver training sessions covering the characteristics of different types of

disabilities, the particular needs and challenges of newcomers with disabilities, the current legislation and its application and referral services for newcomers with disabilities. At the same time, the project will focus on building bridges between the settlement and disability sectors by facilitating the creation of partnerships among key players in both fields.

## Appendix C: Focus Group Questions

### Focus Group Questions (newcomers)

QUESTIONS
1. Do you currently, or have you currently used the services of a settlement agency? If so, tell us about your experience (s) with the services
2. What are the specific areas of settlement in which you need (or needed in the past) most help with
3. Do you think settlement workers have enough information to orient you about services for people with disabilities?
4. What are the main challenges you face as a newcomer with a disability?
5. Are you aware of specific disability-related services that you can access as a person with a disability? Are you aware of services for specific types of disabilities?
6. What are the best services you have received as a newcomer with a disability?
7. What improvements in services to newcomers with disabilities would you suggest for service providers?
8. If a service provider were to give service to a person with a disability from a cultural background familiar to yours, what advice would you give them in terms of communicating effectively with that person about his/her needs?

### Focus Group Questions (service providers)

1. What services does your agency provide for newcomers with disabilities? If you do not provide specific services for this group, do you make accommodations for them when giving them service? Give us some examples
2. What services for newcomers with disabilities do you think are most needed in your agency?
3. In your experience, what do you think are the challenges newcomers with disabilities face?
4. Do you have knowledge of the barriers experienced by newcomers with disabilities?
5. What type of information would you need in order to better serve newcomers with disabilities?
6. What are the main gaps/challenges you face when giving services to newcomers with disabilities?
7. Are you aware of specific disability-related services that you can refer clients with disabilities to? (for example, specific employment services) Are you aware of services for specific types of disabilities? For example Centre for Independent Living, CAMH, etc.)
8. Name some “best practices” in services for newcomers with disabilities in your agency
9. What improvements in services for newcomers with disabilities can be implemented in your agency right away? Over time?
10. What policies and/or procedures would need to be in place to help you better serve newcomers with disabilities?